

Experimenting with Sociology: A View from the Outlook Tower

by Charlotte Bates
University of Oxford

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Abstract

This paper describes a site-specific sociological experiment and looks back at the history of British sociology from the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh. It considers the role of technological innovation in observation, and explores how attention is guided through two exercises in sensory attunement; augmented listening and telescopic looking. Reconfiguring the observer through different technologies and devices, the paper questions what it means to listen and to look, and highlights how our sociological outlook is deeply ethical and historical.

Keywords: *Experimental Methods, Visual Sociology*

Experimenting With Sociology: A View From The Outlook Tower

1.1 One admission ticket and one hundred steps later I stood alone on the rooftop of the Outlook Tower in the heart of Edinburgh, Scotland. The city sprawled out around me, bound by the Firth of Forth to the North and the Pentland Hills to the South. Arthur's Seat, a wild piece of highland landscape, dominated the horizon to the East, and historic Edinburgh Castle sat immediately to the West. On the way up I had passed by the entrance to a modern World of Illusions; rooms filled with magic, mirrors, and the sounds of children laughing. Once, the five lower storeys had contained a museum, each floor giving way in ever increasing scales to the one below it so that visitors, after rushing straight up to the top, could descend slowly downward from Edinburgh, through Scotland, to Europe and finally into a museum of the entire world. Each floor had been filled with maps, models, photographs, diagrams, paintings, globes, and more. Surrounded by the skyline, I found the last remaining traces of the history of the building, no more than a few small photographs and snippets of text stuck to the walls of the top floor. I had originally been led here by Professor John Scott and his Annual Methods Lab Lecture, 'Maximising impact through research methods: a view from early British sociology', which he gave at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2010. Scott's disclosure of the hidden history of British sociology had brought to light this place and its significance as a site of cosmopolitan sociological interest, technological innovation, and public engagement.

1.2 The building itself was bought at auction by Patrick Geddes in 1892, having first opened in 1853 as 'Shorts Observatory and Museum of Science and Art'. Geddes was a town planner, a biologist and an amateur sociologist of the best kind. His activities in Edinburgh contributed to the establishment of the Sociological Society and the *Sociological Review* in London, and helped to establish sociology as a discipline in British universities (Scott 2007: 2). Upon purchasing the building from Maria Short, he re-named it 'the Outlook Tower', because, the tale goes, he wanted to change people's outlook. He used the camera obscura, which is still housed in the rooftop chamber, to show members of the public the relationship between the town and the environment that surrounds it, so that they might be able to situate their lives in a broader context. Today, entering the darkened room is still a magical experience. In Victorian times, the curiosity of seeing live moving images through a giant periscope and being invited to pick people up on your hands or make them climb over paper bridges on the round viewing table must have seemed tantamount to witchcraft, as the guide there told me.

1.3 Putting these pieces of history together with the challenge that had been set by 'Experimenting with Geography: See-Hear-Make-Do'^[1], the Tower presented itself as a perfect place from which to make a site-specific sociological experiment. Although only the top floor remains in its original use, the building as Geddes imagined it resonates with historical and contemporary sociological concerns. Together with his colleague Branford, Geddes had traced the development of sociology through three movements of thought: regionalism, humanism, and civism: 'Regionalism is the movement in thought that they saw developing in the geographical writers such as Le Play. It stresses the need to understand human life within the personal context and milieu of family, neighbourhood, and locality, all seen in the environmental context of the relation to nature. Humanism is a movement in thought that they saw as specific to Comte. It stresses altruism and cooperation and their extension to a global scale as the basis of universal "humanity". Regionalism highlights the local while humanism highlights the global, and it is the relationship between the local and the global that they saw as central to sociological concerns' (Scott and Bromley 2008: 3). Geddes incorporated these three movements into every aspect of his museum experience. While the museum no longer exists, the Tower's vantage point continues to invite an exploration of the ideas that contributed to the early development of sociology and which remain relevant to the discipline today.

1.4 Geddes had also designed the Tower to heighten the senses. Visitors were rushed to the top, plunged into darkness and exposed to the far-reaching horizon: 'The Outlook Tower should be seen in terms of a scientific experiment to which visitors were subjected by Geddes, in order to awaken and heighten their visual faculties. The sequence of strongly contrasting physical experiences included climbing the spiral staircase to the top of the Tower, "because the exertion of climbing makes one's blood circulate more rapidly, thus clearing the fog out of the brain and preparing one physically for the mental thrill of these outlooks"...' (Chabard 2001). The visual awakening continued as: 'Visitors kept having to adapt to different visual modes - from direct to indirect, from long-range to close-up, from the analytic to the synoptic. Sometimes their visual range was stretched to the horizon [on the roof-terrace], sometimes it was restricted [to the screen in the Camera Obscura]. By such means, visitors were invited to experience all the mysteries of vision' (Chabard 2001).

1.5 These examples of visual innovation captured my own visual imagination. In the craft of sociological research it is not simply what we look at that is important but also how we look. In turn, how we look informs what we see. By learning to look in different ways we might begin to discover previously unseen aspects of social life. Visual methods are one way of putting our eyes to work, but while they are currently gaining popularity in the social science arena the act of looking often remains unquestioned. In our ocularcentric society visuality has become so heavily aligned with surveillance, spectacle, and seduction that we have forgotten the magic, the mystery, and the innocent thrill of looking. Geddes reminds us that looking is a physical experience with the power to stimulate the intellect, and that we can use our eyes to reveal the wonder of the world as well as to strip it bare. While the physical and psychological mechanisms of vision may no longer be a mystery, the visual technology housed in the Tower points to the fact that the ways in which we listen, see, and pay attention to the world have a deeply historical character (Crary 2001: 1). Engaging with these technologies, I began to question what it means to look. The camera obscura and the telescopes that reside together on the top floor of the Tower represent two distinct models of vision: an eighteenth century classical model and a nineteenth century disjunct model. The classical camera obscura model of vision creates an ideal observer who passively receives an image of the exterior world from a privileged point of view. In contrast, looking through the telescope the observer's attention is drawn towards selected fragments of the world and away from others, so that vision becomes isolated. These two technologies revealed what it meant to be an observer before and after the late nineteenth century crisis of perception: to move from passive reception to playing a part in the making of perception (Crary 2001: 155). The distinction highlights the power of visual devices and the ethical significance of sociological attention. As the psychologist and philosopher William James wrote, 'Each of us literally *chooses*, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit' (as quoted in Crary 2001: 62).

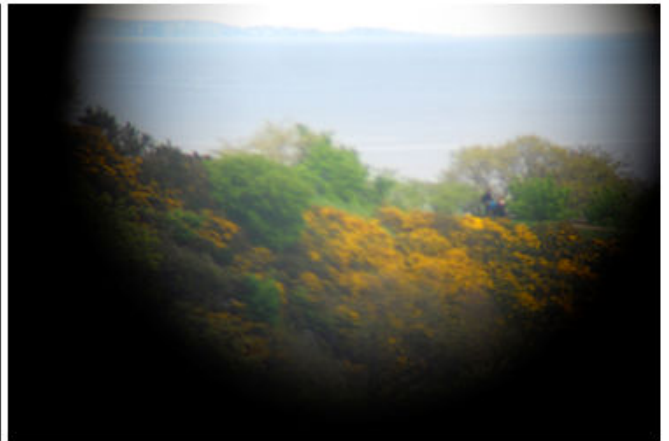
1.6 Geddes's visual experiments at the Outlook Tower also reminded me of another experiment and another tower. In 'The London Ear', Les Back writes about sonic experimentation from the heights of Warlington Tower, the twelve-storey building that is home to Goldsmiths Sociology Department in New Cross, London. Like looking, listening is a sociological device, and it can reveal all sorts of things if it is used imaginatively. There is so much to hear and to connect to in the soundscape that surrounds us, yet we often rely on interviews alone to inform our accounts. As Back writes, 'If we stop listening only to "voices" then we can reanimate the idea of description and attention' (Back 2010a: 17). Following the advice of composer and writer Murray Schafer, I decided to clean my ears and to listen attentively to everything, to all the sounds around me, including the ones that I had stopped hearing because I had become so accustomed to them. Activating both my eyes and my ears, I decided to find out what could be detected by looking and listening from the Outlook Tower, using various instruments of observation to augment my senses and heighten my attention. Sound recording equipment, binoculars, and telescopes became devices through which to look and hear anew.

1.7 As the roof was at that moment completely empty, I started with my listening exercise. Putting on my headphones and turning up the volume, or, more accurately 'turning up the background' (Back 2010a: 25), I met the full force of a construction drill. This was hardly surprising, as immediately below the West side of the Tower were swarms of men in yellow jackets, scaffolding, and diggers. My immediate disappointment soon turned to revelation however, as I began to think about how cities are always under construction. Geddes himself was a town planner, and he lived during an era of industrialisation and urban expansion. Edinburgh was so overcrowded by the mid-18th century that many of the city's population were forced to live in slums. The new town area was built, and throughout the 19th century the city continued to grow. When Geddes had stood here the panorama would have been changing and growing too, and it was a sight that concerned him greatly. As Chabard writes: 'Geddes perceived the "paleotechnic" city in terms of a three-fold breakdown between individuals and their spatial, temporal and cultural environment. In a way, the principal aim of the Outlook Tower manifest in his 1906 guidebook was to restore the lost inter-relationship between individuals and their urban and geographical space, their historic heritage and the universal body of knowledge accumulated by men' (Chabard 2001).

1.8 A momentary pause in the drilling allowed the second most prominent sound of Edinburgh today to drift into my soundscape: bagpipes. 'Tartan tat' shops now line the Royal Mile, pumping the noise of recorded bagpipes out into the air. This particular sound marks Edinburgh's status as the second most visited city in the UK, and drew my attention to the multicultural tensions and the undercurrent of racism that exist there. Immigrant families own many of the tourist shops in Edinburgh, and complaints about sound pollution and the multitude of 'tat' on sale are hard to disentangle from hostility towards the shop owners themselves. The wind blew the music in another direction, leaving the constant background hum of the city in my ears. I thought about how desensitised we are to the everyday sounds of the city, and about how our bodies protect us from the drone that was amplified in my ears. As Back writes, 'Our ears become soundproofed, double-glazed like our homes to keep out the noise of the city' (Back 2010b: 34).



1.9 The second part of my experiment involved looking through the collection of binoculars and telescopes that stand scattered across the Tower roof. Lining my camera lens up with the telescopic lens, my eyes were drawn to the minute details of buildings before the power of the lens transported me out beyond the city and into the landscape that surrounds it. There is something magical about looking in miniature, at seeing things that are at once so detailed and yet so far away. I spotted a man walking on a ridge, and thought about how unaware he was that someone was watching him out there in the wilderness. This particular act of looking returned me to some of the issues that threaten to overshadow the practice of visual sociology today. The power of the frame to act as an isolating agent and the possibility that ensues of slipping into a mode of surveillance troubles ethical visual practice, but our fear of looking also threatens to restrict our ideas about what it means to look, and, for that matter, to listen. One last look through the telescope and I saw a clock, and realised I was going to be late for the next session.



1.10 Descending the Tower I was struck by the difference between listening and looking, by how my attention had been directed to different things through different sensory attunements. Each device had reconfigured the ways in which observation became possible, deepening and extending my senses but also isolating and restricting them. Experimenting with observation had led me to question what it means to be an attentive observer, to be absorbed in a moment and distanced from everything else, to magnify particular sounds and scenes but to negate others. It had highlighted the researcher as a figure who sees and hears but it had also reinforced the limits of our senses. Engaging with the history of vision, the particular relationship between visual devices and the act of seeing was revealed, redefining the observer in relation to his or her technology. Beyond the specifics of method, Geddes reminded me of the civism and care on which sociology was originally built. One of the founders of British sociology, he promoted interdisciplinary collaboration (the founding members of the Sociological Society included geographers, philosophers, historians, biologists and economists (Scott 2007: 5), methodological innovation, and public engagement, all with the aim of cultivating and supporting an engaged sociological outlook. These concerns are just as relevant to sociology today as they were at the beginning of the century.

Notes

¹ *Experimenting with Geography: See - Hear - Make - Do*, was an international training and networking project funded by the ESRC and organised by Dr Michael Gallagher at the University of Edinburgh. The weeklong workshop, held in May 2010, was dedicated to developing a diverse range of craft skills associated with audio, visual and site-specific methodologies.

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